


Policy Forum 01-02J: Discussion of William J. Taylor's "North Korea Policy: Steady As She Goes"

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By Joel Wit

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I. Introduction

This commentary is Joel Wit, a Guest Scholar at the Brookings Institution and a former US State Department official who worked on DPRK issues from 1993-1999. This is the ninth in a series on the future of US relations with Northeast Asian countries under the administration of incoming US President George W. Bush. Wit responds to the first essay in the series by William J. Taylor, who argues that the Bush administration should retain the Clinton administration's approach to the two Koreas and he defends the cautious North Korean pace of responding to the overtures in its direction.

Wit argues that the Bush administration has not been in office long enough to become "frustrated" with the North Koreans and has not had the opportunity to devote time to policy formation on the DPRK threat beyond vague statements of the need for "transparency" and "reciprocity." Wit also argues that progress on the 1994 Agreed Framework has been slow because of the North Korean

negotiating style and ongoing doubts about its program more than because of US foot-dragging.

II. Discussion by Joel Wit

I agree with Bill Taylor's general point that the Bush Administration should try to remain on a course similar to that taken by the Clinton Administration in dealing with North Korea. The recent outcome of the Bush-Kim summit leaves it open to question whether that will happen or not. But in all fairness to this Administration, it has only been in office for a little over a month and has not yet even begun to review US policy towards the North. Hopefully, President Kim's visit will stimulate that process but there is no guarantee about the outcome and many obstacles probably remain.

I would like to take issue with some of the specific points in Mr. Taylor's essay. First, the 1994 nuclear crisis was not caused by a CIA estimate in March 1994 that North Korea was rushing towards the production of nuclear weapons. The fact was the CIA had been saying for some time that the North's negotiations with the United States were just a stalling tactic and that it in fact probably had sufficient material to produce 1-2 weapons.

While I participated in dealing with that crisis as part of Ambassador Gallucci's staff and am currently writing a book about it at the Brookings Institution, the facts are a matter of public record. The crisis was ignited in late April 1994 when North Korea began to unload the spent fuel rods from its nuclear reactor without proper IAEA supervision. The fear was the North was destroying vital information which would shed light on how much plutonium it produced in the past.

Second, Mr. Taylor says that the problems in negotiations with North Korea are in part the result of their frustration with the maddeningly slow pace of the KEDO reactor project. Having worked on that project for 5 years, I will second the motion that the pace has been maddeningly slow and there is enough blame to go around for everyone, including the North Koreans. But I do not think the slow pace of current negotiations with the North has anything to do with the reactor project. Rather, it has to do with their own style of negotiation-- no one except Kim Jong Il seems to be able to cut a deal on missiles-- and the inability of the Clinton Administration at the end of its term to push forward with clinching an agreement. Sure the North Koreans are complaining vociferously about the pace of the project but that is just their normal behavior. If someone put an acceptable missile deal on the table tomorrow with the appropriate "carrots" they would accept it almost on the spot.

Third, is the Bush Administration "frustrated" by the North's demands for free space launches and payments to offset the huge losses the North would sustain if it stopped its missile exports? Well, I don't think it has been in office long enough to be "frustrated." It has not looked seriously at the issue except to make general statements about the need for "transparency" and "reciprocity." But Mr. Taylor is right if he means the Administration may be starting from the premise that it wants something and is prepared to not give much in return. The fact is any missile deal is going to cost something and hopefully this Administration will understand that once it gets down to business. And by the way, North Korea may be demanding a lot but I can guarantee it is just their opening position and will get smaller and smaller as any negotiation drags on. That has been my experience in the past in negotiating with them.

The crossroads, as W. Taylor puts it, is right ahead of us.

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The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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